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ABSTRACT

The Child Abuse Potential Inventory was completed by 56 Head Start staff. Because the Head Start program creates an environment where staff work almost exclusively with parents or with children, it was possible to examine the perceived differences among workers attracted to child or parent work. Scores for classroom and non-classroom staff were compiled and examined by analysis of variance for significant differences. The results revealed that, while the mean abuse score for classroom staff was approximately 17 points higher than the mean score for non-classroom staff, both scores were within the normal, nonabusive range and the difference was not statistically significant. Stepwise regression was used to develop a prediction equation for potential abuse scores. Variables used in the analysis were age, race, marital status, number of children in the home, education level, and staff position. Race was the only variable that entered into the equation. The implications for use of such information in the screening, hiring, and assignment of staff to various work roles and responsibilities are explored. References are included. (TE)

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Potential for Abuse Among Workers in a Preschool Child Development Program

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Abstract

The Child Abuse Potential (CAP) Inventory was completed by 56 Head Start staff. Because the uniqueness of the Head Start program creates an environment where staff work almost exclusively with parents or with children, it was possible to examine the perceived differences among workers attracted to child or parent work. Scores for classroom and non-classroom staff were compiled and examined by ANOVA for significant differences. Stepwise regression was used to develop a prediction equation for potential abuse scores. The implications for use of such information in the screening, hiring, and assignment of staff to various work roles and responsibilities will be explored.

Introduction

Although the problem of reported abuse among child care workers is not a new phenomena, the problem has received recent media attention. The resulting uproar has led to an increased awareness of abuse concerns and has focused interest in finding solutions. Haddock and McQueen (1983) suggested that a key to the problem of institutional child abuse lies in prevention and prediction.

Interest in prevention has produced an interest in screening prospective employees for a history of abusive behavior or a potential to become abusive. Screening processes may involve having the prospective employee sign a disclosure form and/or the use of a personal background check by law enforcement agencies. The State of Kansas requires that licensed child care facilities submit the names of new employees to a state law enforcement agency to be checked for child abuse convictions. The Head Start Program has initiated a nation-wide policy that requires prospective employees sign a disclosure form indicating whether they have ever had complaints, charges, arrests, or convictions for child abuse. Other human service agencies/programs involved in child care functions are exploring the use of screening instruments as part of the hiring process. Although all of these methods provide useful, usable information about employees, prevention should extend beyond simply screening out the potential problem employee.

Child care work is considered to be stressful. Mattingly (1977) attributed the stress to poor training, agency attitudes

and policies, and the worker's status within the organization. Birnbach (1973) also supported these observations by stating that child care staff generally have the least formal training and the lowest status in the institution.

Although child abuse is found at all socioeconomic levels, it is more prevalent among individuals with low education, low income, and low occupational status (Gil, 1986). One of the unique qualities of Head Start is that the program is required to hire part of the staff from among parents or former parents who have had children enrolled in the program. Because Head Start serves children and families who subsist at or below the poverty level, the program knowingly hires staff from a socioeconomic group that is vulnerable for abuse potential.

Because of the mandate to make employment opportunities available to parents, a study of current Head Start employees in a local program was undertaken to examine their potential for abuse.

Method

The 82 staff members of the Wichita, KS Head Start program were asked to complete the Child Abuse Potential (CAP) Inventory (Milner, 1986) and the accompanying demographic information. Fifty-six staff members chose to participate in the study. All the inventories were completed, on the same day, during separate inservice training sessions for classroom staff (teachers and aides) and non-classroom staff. Questionnaires were completed by 24 classroom staff and 32 non-classroom staff. Three

questionnaires were eliminated from the study because of an excessive number of blank answers (greater then 10% of responses).

Results

The demographic information for all of the respondents has been summarized in Table 1. The table depicts profiles for the entire group as well as the profiles for the classroom and non-classroom staff. All of the staff who completed an inventory were female. At the time the study was completed, only one staff position (non-classroom) was occupied by a male.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Entire Group	Classroom	non-Classroom
Mean Age (yrs)	36.9	34.6	38.2
Mean # Children	1.4	1.3	1.5
Mean Ed. Level (yrs)	13.8	13.1	14.3
Race:			
Black	25.6%	41.2%	13.6%
Caucasian	59.0%	52.9%	63.6%
Hispanic	15.4%	5.9%	22.7%
Marital Status:			
Single	13.6%	27.8%	3.8%
Married	70.4%	55.6%	80.8%
Separated	2.3%	0.0%	3.8%
Divorced	13.6%	16.7%	11.5%
N =	53	21	32

Staff position and race of the staff member and staff position and marital status were tested for significance using

Chi Square. While both of these variables proved to not be statistically significant, staff position by race of the staff member was approaching significance ($p = .075$). Many of the non-classroom positions required college degrees (such as nurses, speech therapists or education specialists). Generally these positions tended to be occupied by Caucasian females.

The completed inventories were examined for elevated validity indexes. Using the criteria recommended by Milner (1986), nine inventories, four (19.0%) classroom staff and five (15.6%) non-classroom staff were eliminated from further analysis because the Faking Good Index was elevated. Two inventories that had an elevated Faking Bad Index (both non-classroom staff) were retained because the Abuse Scores were within the normal range and met established criteria.

Figure 1 depicts the mean scores for classroom and non-classroom staff on the Abuse Potential Score (104.8 & 87.7) and the factor scores for Distress (66.7 & 56.4), Rigidity (12.5 & 7.7), Unhappiness (8.6 & 9.9), Problems with Own Child (4.4 & 2.1), Problems with Family (4.3 & 7.6), and Problems with Others (7.9 & 3.4).

The results of the ANOVA to test the significance of the abuse potential score and staff position are found in Table 2. While the mean abuse score for classroom staff was approximately 17 points higher than for non-classroom staff, both scores were within the normal, nonabusive range (215 is the cutoff score); the difference was not statistically significant.

Figure 1

Mean Scores for Classroom and Non-Classroom Staff on the Abuse Potential Score and Related Factor Scores

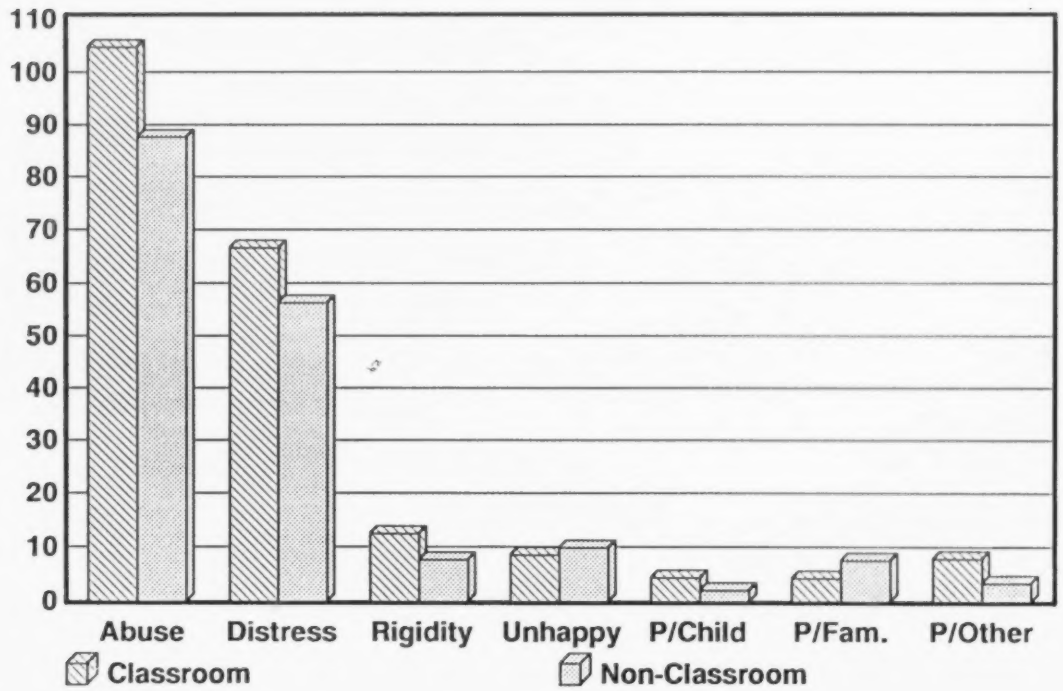

Table 2

Summary of Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F
Between Groups	3023.3	1	3023.3	1.01*
Within Groups	126310.2	42	3007.4	
Total	129333.5	43		

* p > .05

A stepwise regression was used to develop a predictive equation for the abuse score. The following variables were used in the analysis: age, race, marital status, number of children in the home, education level, and staff position in the program. Race was the only variable that entered into the equation (See Table 3).

Table 3

Summary of Regression on Abuse Score
Across Demographic Variables

Variable	B Value	F	p > F
Race	32.00	4.93	.037

R Square = 0.1831

Discussion

A number of factors need to be considered in designing selection procedures for new employees. The use of a battery of screening tests alone is not enough because misclassification is

a potential problem. In the Haddock and McQueen (1983) study, all of the non-abusers were correctly classified while 86% of the known abusers were correctly classified. Many institutions and programs have started using law enforcement agency records to check the background of potential employees. Most of these records exist on a local or statewide basis only. A nationwide database for such information currently is not available. In addition, only those individuals convicted of abuse would have a record. Frequently reports and charges of suspected abuse are handled through a child protective service agency in conjunction with a district attorney's office without ever reaching a formal trial proceeding.

While screening procedures would probably identify most of the known abusers the screening process needs to be coupled with personnel policies that provide protection for children in care and augment staff productivity. Agency policies need to reflect the inherent stresses in child care work and recognize the potential abuse vulnerabilities of staff attracted to day care and preschool programs.

Because of the multidimensional nature of child abuse (Belsky, 1983), an effective strategy, in the child care setting, should rely on additional training of child care workers and their supervisors, improved supervision of staff and last, but certainly not least, increased wages. Gil (1986) noted that the legal minimum wage does not assure an income above the poverty level. Thus child care workers who must cope with the demands and stresses of working with children are often also

stressed on a personal level by the daily coping necessitated by living at or near the poverty level.

As stated previously, child care workers often have the least formal training and the lowest status in the organization (Birnbach, 1973, Mattingly, 1977). The position of teacher aide is often regarded as an entry level position. Head Start programs, with their strong tradition of parent involvement, often hire parents to fill this position as a way to help parents gain economic independence. Thus the requirements for this position frequently may read: "high school diploma or GED preferred; experience working with children helpful".

While this appears to be less then an ideal situation, strategies used in the Wichita, KS Head Start program mediate the problem and could be adapted to most child care/preschool settings. First there is an active and on-going schedule of training within the program at both the individual and group level. Topics range from classroom management to curriculum. The education specialist frequently observes aides and teachers in their classrooms and follows these observations with individual meetings about what was observed with praise for things done well and specific suggestions for improvement in problem areas. Teachers and aides are encouraged to obtain additional formal training and education. Contingency contracts have been negotiated to provide tuition assistance and grants to staff who complete specific coursework.

An open door policy for the classroom reduces the opportunities for abusive situations to develop. A variety of

staff, consultants and parents are in the Wichita Head Start classrooms daily to observe children and classroom staff, to work as volunteers, or to provide special services to the children. These activities often occur informally and, for the most part, unscheduled ahead of time.

In many child care/preschool settings, non-classroom staff may have the responsibility of supervision of classroom teams (teachers and aides). As illustrated by the demographic profiles in this study, those supervisors often have a higher level of education, have a tendency to be Caucasian, are more likely to be married (with two family incomes) and probably come from middle class backgrounds. Supervisors would benefit from training that would sensitize them to the concomitant problems and values of workers who may have come from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.

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